



United States Mission to the OSCE

Statement of Response on the Report of Head of Mission in Georgia

As delivered by Chargé d'Affaires Douglas A. Davidson
to the Permanent Council, Vienna
February 6, 2003

Now if I may turn to Ambassador Lacombe's report, I should like to express our thanks for his characteristically useful and informative report. It is always a pleasure to see him here to the Permanent Council.

Mr. Chairman it is, I think, good news indeed that the planned expansion of the Border Monitoring Operation to include the Georgian border with the Dagestan Republic of the Russian Federation is proceeding apace. I am therefore very pleased to be able to announce that the United States has included in our fiscal year 2003 budget the entire amount required for equipping the additional Georgian Border Guard security detachments necessary to support this expansion. We expect this money to be available in the very near future. I should add that the United States has also nominated a number of well-qualified candidates to serve in the expanded cadre of Border Monitors, and we very much hope we will be permitted to continue to support the Border Monitoring Operation in this way as well.

I would also to welcome the presence in Vienna this week of General Rietveld. While we are sorry to see our good friend General Hee depart the post, we have every confidence that General Rietveld will provide equally outstanding leadership to the Border Monitoring Operation.

Turning to South Ossetia, Mr. Chairman, I should like to reiterate the concerns I expressed last week in this Council over the reported appearance in the Zone of Conflict of undeclared and impermissible heavy weapons. We look forward to receiving further information on the situation at the earliest possible opportunity, and we would particularly appreciate the dissemination of the appropriate portions of the Joint Peacekeeping Force report on this matter, when it is issued.

On a more optimistic note, it does seem that the overall situation in South Ossetia has at worst stabilized and may indeed even be improving, the matter of heavy weapons notwithstanding. The naming and early active engagement of the new Georgian representative on South Ossetia shows promise, as does the noteworthy list of confidence-building measures that Ambassador Lacombe has listed in his written report.

Regarding Abkhazia, I will limit myself to expressing deep concern over the treatment of ethnic Georgian residents of the Gali District, and join the call for a speedy opening of a Human Rights Office in the Gali District.

In the Human Dimension, Ambassador Lacombe has highlighted two issues to which the United States attaches particular concern, they are Religious Freedom and the fight against Trafficking in Persons. We publish annual reports on both subjects, and we have been

working very closely with the Georgian government to help address their problems in these areas.

Unfortunately, the persistent problem of extremist behavior by radical Orthodox groups in Georgia has not in any way subsided. It has, in fact, worsened. In the most recent incident on January 24 of this year, the defrocked Father Basili took the battle to some of the most mainstream branches of the Christian faith, attacking and disrupting an ecumenical service that included not only the Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Baptist and Armenian Apostolic Churches, but also the Georgian Orthodox Church itself. An equally disturbing incident arose just last week, when members of the ultra-Orthodox group Jvari violently disrupted a gathering of Jehovah's Witnesses on January 30 in Rustavi. Unlike Father Basili, who has been officially excommunicated from the Georgian Orthodox Church, the Jvari group is recognized by the Georgian Patriarchy and receives funding as a legitimate Orthodox organization.

The behavior resorted to by Father Basili and the Jvari group is simply not acceptable in modern society, and we must all do everything in our power to combat and denounce the bigotry and the intolerance that they represent.

In closing, Mr. Chairman, I should like to once again commend Ambassador Lacombe, General Hee, and their able staffs for their continuing excellent work in the field.

I thank you.